Smells Like JP-5

By Lt. Peter J. Dicaro

Flight training in Meridian, Miss., presents many obstacles for the future naval aviator. Besides the many hours of studying required to master procedures, you're challenged to transition from an aircraft that can move at barely three miles a minute to one that moves at a blistering five to six miles a minute.

The countless attempts to keep a ball on the lens have sent more than one fledgling ball-flyer on a drinking binge—not that you'd be able to tell the difference. One proposal I heard to help ease the frustrations of the "neo-ball-flyer" was an air cannon loaded with a tennis ball and mounted to the back of the lens. A junior pilot could see the fruits of his labor, as a ball traveling quickly upward would continue off the top of the lens and provide extra ball-flying time. The same cannon could be filled with confetti and would provide an uplifting finale, if not a useful training aid.

For those flight students at Meridian who suffer from the stresses of flight training, probably the most positive move the Navy could make to provide some relief would be to remove a rite of passage. It involves a certain simulator-flight instructor most students know as "The Yeller." On the other hand, those flight students who are not intimidated by his boisterous demeanor remember him as an excellent instructor and aviator who is a lot of fun to fly with. It's important to understand "The Yeller's" personality in the cockpit because it directly influences his piloting skills.

"The Yeller" and I were scheduled to fly an OCF-1, an out-of-control flight. This event consists of several varying departures of the aircraft and is meant to increase the student's confidence and ability to recover from spins and other out-of-control-flight situations. After a lengthy discussion about the aerodynamics of a spin, we took to the skies over rural Mississippi.

The first maneuver was an adverse-yaw departure. I entered the correct inputs, and the Buckeye flipped on its back and began spiraling toward the pine trees.

"Yeehaw! Ride it, baby! Ride it!" came over the ICS. This wasn't the sadistic instructor I had heard about.

As I recovered the aircraft to set up for the next maneuver, a fine mist started to permeate the cockpit. At first, I thought this mist was fog from the air conditioning. Anyone who has flown T-2s knows they can produce a considerable amount of fog on warm, humid, Mississippi days. This fog, however, looked slightly different. Just as I realized this difference, my instructor told me to take a whiff and tell him what I thought. Before I even could say, "Sir, that's JP-5," the controls were passed to the back, and we were in a split-S out of the working area. Apparently, fuel, oxygen and 115 VAC don't mix well.

The next several minutes should have been turned into a training video on how to handle an emergency. The instructor took control of the situation, knocking out checklists, talking on the radio to several different people, and making it possible for me to act as human luggage—a good thing because I otherwise couldn't have kept up with how quickly he was moving through tasks. Crew coordination is an important aspect of aviation, but the rules change when the other member of the crew is a hindrance, with only 150 hours of flight time. I backed him up the best I could, but I wasn't left with much to do.

We eventually landed the opposite way on the active, despite tower's initial clearance, and rolled to a stop, with the engines already secured. I looked down to grab the pins for the ejection seat, and, when I looked back up, my instructor was on the deck, helmet in hand, talking to the crash crew. He used to brag he could get out of a T-2 faster than anyone in the world; you'll hear no arguments from me.

Aviators are trained to handle emergencies, but few would have handled one so seamlessly and efficiently. The key was quickly executing a solid game plan and aggressively doing exactly what was needed. The instructor wasted no time waiting for me to catch up. He also didn't accept tower's initial instructions to circle around and land to the north when we were approaching from the north.

Maintenance found a significant amount of fuel had entered the bleed-air lines and sprayed into the cockpit. Thankfully, this situation didn't turn into a mishap. The confetti would have been a nice addition.

Lt. Dicaro flies with VAW-113.

PHCS TERRY COSGROVE